

A Need for Speed

By Staff Sgt. Bryan Thompson

Motorcycle accident leaves one friend mourning another's death



When I was 19 years old, I had a need for speed and aspirations of owning a sportbike and becoming the next Scott Russell. I had just enlisted in the Air Force and found myself living in the land of the rising sun (Japan). If there was one place to fulfill the dream, it was here.

In Japan, there were so many motorcycles that I had never seen before. Racing bikes that were street legal? This can't be! I soon found

myself riding a Yamaha FZR 400. It was beautiful with its pearl white and Yamaha blue paint. Now all I had to do was learn how to ride the thing. It was mandatory for every military member to attend the Motorcycle Safety Foundation Rider's Course offered on base. I signed up for the class. The day after completing the course, I was confident that I could negotiate the roads of Japan with ease.

After gaining two years of experience and owning about five different motorcycles, an instructor and good friend asked if I would like to become an instructor for the base. I was very excited and, of course, said yes to his offer.

Following my graduation from the instructors' course, we began teaching students with the help of an assistant. Our assistant was a young man by the name of Hunter. He had never owned a motorcycle and never attended the course to learn to ride. Instead he just helped pick up the cones following each exercise and assisted with the audiovisual portions. I worked beside him as an aircraft mechanic in the Air Force, and we also held "off duty" jobs in the same establishment. One day, Hunter approached me about purchasing a motorcycle and taking the course. I helped him out, and from that point on, we were inseparable. We became very close friends, and we both shared the same dream — to one-day race motorcycles.

The roads through the mountains of Japan were breathtaking. Unfortunately, when we rode we weren't looking at the colorful waterfalls, which cast a beautiful rainbow over the rivers. Instead we were there to learn how these awesome pieces of machinery would react through the tight twisty turns of pavement that those wonderful county workers had laid for us.

As the months passed, we both began to blossom into better riders. We knew the roads like the back of our hands and had begun to pick up the pace. Back then I thought it was cool to be the fastest up the mountain, as did everyone who rode with us.

One day, Hunter and I, along with one of our students, decided to go for a ride. We stopped at the base of the mountain to give the new rider a safety briefing.

"You are to ride within your limits. Be aware of the large trucks that notoriously come into your lane, and just have fun. Don't try to keep up with us because we know the roads and tend to be faster getting up the mountain."

As we carved through the mountains, I began to pull away from the other two. I looked into my mirrors and could only see the others' headlights in the distance. I continued on until I came to a

bit of construction. In Japan, when there's only one lane open because of construction, a short stoplight signals when you're cleared through. They also provide you with a timer telling you how long you have to wait. As I came to a stop, I watched the seconds click off: 56, 55, 54, all the way down to the 30s.

I looked back to see where the other two were, but they were nowhere in sight. A chill shot up my spine, because I knew what that meant. Someone was down.

I turned my bike around and headed back up thinking to myself that the new guy had laid it down around one of the corners. As I came out of a right hander, I noticed the new rider's bike on the side of the road on its kickstand. He wasn't with it. I looked ahead at the next corner and saw the silhouette of a rider and a motorcycle lying on the road. As I arrived at the scene, I noticed it was Hunter. He had struck a car head on. I jumped from my bike, forgetting to put the kickstand down — the bike fell on my leg.

As I freed myself, I pulled my helmet from my head and approached his lifeless body. He lay there facedown with blood beginning to trickle from his helmet onto the pavement. I asked the other guy if Hunter was OK. The other rider couldn't speak. He just shook his head as tears rolled down his face.

I removed Hunter's glove and attempted to check his pulse ... nothing. I asked the other two to assist me in rolling him over so we could try CPR. We did so, being very careful to keep him as straight as possible to prevent any further neck injury. I had learned not to remove a helmet from someone who has crashed for the same reason.

As we slowly rolled him over, his eyes came into view. They were no longer gleaming with life and happiness. We knew he had died.

I began to cry and then got angry. I kicked Hunter's motorcycle, then picked it up and flipped it over. Then I began to pray.

I had to ride my motorcycle home after emergency crews took Hunter away. The padding in my helmet was saturated with my tears. My best friend was gone, and there was nothing that I could do. Was it my fault? What happened?

The police later said that Hunter had run wide in the turn and struck the car head on. He was killed instantly of a broken neck. I still have a need for speed, but only on the racetrack.

I don't want Hunter's death to be in vain. I hope this story will bring to light the dangers of riding motorcycles on the street and what one mistake at the wrong place and time can do to you. You may be the fastest up the mountain, but are you also the most foolish? Save the really fast stuff for the track.